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## A Ministry of Friendship

Tom Kessy

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# A Ministry of

Tom Kessy CSSp



*"The land is my mother. . . .  
When the land is taken away  
from us or destroyed,  
we feel hurt because  
we belong to the land  
and we are part of it."*

## AUSTRALIA

**A**s a Spiritan I am always conscious of my call to share in the Church's mission of evangelization. Jesus defined his role by quoting Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me: therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor." I realize that this defines the vocation I have received.

As I minister to the aboriginal people in Port Hedland, and the surrounding territories in Western Australia, this vocation forces me to answer the challenging question, "Am I good news to them? Is my presence felt? Am I a friend?" In the context of Aboriginal culture and history the meaning of "friendship" or "relationship" is crucial to daily life. Aboriginal people are bound by relationships to land, people, history, experience and all that exists. To build up relationship or a ministry, friendship is a *sine qua non*.

### Aboriginal history

Much of the history of the Aboriginal people in this area is one of suffering harsh treatment and brutality at the hands of the non-indigenous people. They were labeled savages, less than human. They were shot, whipped, poisoned, arrested, chained, transported, tortured, jailed and executed. It is a history which is full of injustices.

Though discriminatory acts no longer apply, the terrible damage done to generations of Aboriginal people still has an impact today. This aspect of the history of the people of the Port Hedland region is not always acknowledged, but it is vital to be aware of their history of suffering. In his manifesto of freedom (Luke 4:18-19), through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ was able to identify the heart of his community's problems. He probably applied the theory of social analysis that acknowledges there is "much I don't know". Indeed this theory, and more importantly the Holy Spirit, has been a great help in my ministry.

### "The land is my mother"

During my first two years in the Port Hedland region I couldn't grasp why land is so important to Aboriginal people until, through

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Port Hedland docks.

the use of social analysis and asking questions, I was able to see the significance of this relationship. One of the elders told me, *"The land is my mother. Like a human mother, the land gives us protection, enjoyment and provides for our needs — economic, social and religious. When the land is taken away from us or destroyed, we feel hurt because we belong to the land and we are part of it."* Another elder said, *"The land is my backbone.... I only stand straight, happy, proud and not ashamed about my colour because I still have land. I can paint, dance, create and sing as my ancestors did before me"*. This finds resonance in the "integrity of creation" which we speak about today.

## Making contact

As a religious and Spiritan I feel privileged to work among Aboriginals. For my first step in getting involved I make contact with them either in the shopping centre or visiting them in their families and communities. I do this through playing cards with them, listening to their stories, fixing their bush bikes, bringing Holy Bread (Holy Eucharist) to the sick and elderly, ministering the sacraments, attending funerals, sharing Christmas and Easter celebrations, appreciating their efforts to reclaim their lost culture and languages.

I begin to earn their trust and become a friend. I must confess it will take many years to earn their trust. I have much to

learn about Aboriginal people, their history, culture and religion in order to get an understanding of their perspective on contemporary issues.

The aftermath of the discriminatory policies continues. The memories of the bad times still remain strong in the minds of most adults today. The stories of racism and discrimination have been passed down

from parents to children. This has created an attitude of mistrust.

Despite their difficulties Aboriginal people are participating in the life of the community as doctors, lawyers, academics, politicians and business entrepreneurs. Some have a huge respect for missionaries and their role in their lives. But it will take decades of friendly service of the good news to undo the harm caused by centuries of bad news. ■

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Fr. Tom Kessy CSSp is from Tanzania and was recently elected leader of the Spiritan group in Australia.

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